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CIA's Webster steps down with high praise from Bush

By Bill Gertz and Paul Bedard
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Bush made the surprise announcement yesterday that CIA Director William Webster is retiring as chief of the U.S. intelligence community after nearly four years in office.

He praised the former federal judge for reinvigorating the agency while "not trying to shape policy."

The president said he had not considered replacements yet, but senior administration officials said the leading candidate is Deputy National Security Adviser Robert M. Gates, a former CIA deputy director.

Others said to be on the list of candidates to replace Mr. Webster include National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, a retired Air Force general, and James Lilley, U.S. ambassador to China and a former CIA operative who is known to want the position.

The Webster resignation was sudden, and the "Judge" is expected to return to private law practice. He could be named as an ambassador, according to a source close to Mr. Webster.

Mr. Webster was FBI director from 1978 until he was appointed CIA director in May 1987. He was named CIA director after the death of William Casey. For the past four years Mr. Webster also has been the director of central intelligence — the chief U.S. intelligence official.

Mr. Webster will remain in his posts until a successor is named and confirmed by the Senate, a CIA spokesman said.

Mr. Bush told reporters at an early-morning news conference Mr. Webster would be returning to private life after 26 years in the federal government, including eight years as a trial and appellate judge and nine years as FBI director.



Fond farewell: President Bush announces William Webster's resignation. AP

"I hate to see him go," the president said.

Mr. Bush, chosen in 1975 to run the CIA, said Mr. Webster "brought an integrity and effectiveness and a insight to the many intelligence-gathering operations of this nation. He has done a superb job."

Mr. Webster, who appeared at the White House with the president, said: "I know I am leaving you a healthy organization. One that has had ... a good track record for its accountability."

"Absolutely," said Mr. Bush.

"You hate to leave, but something tells you that it's a good time to leave," Mr. Webster said. "I still have my roots in the law, and this gives me an opportunity to pursue other avenues in the private sector."

A source close to Mr. Webster said he would accept an ambassadorship if offered the right post.

An administration official close to the CIA said the decision by Mr. Webster to retire was made recently and that the director decided to leave "at a high point" after the success of U.S. intelligence in the Persian Gulf war.

Mr. Webster, 67, also was not looking forward to the current efforts by Congress to reorganize U.S. intelligence, a job that could be handled better by the next CIA director, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Some critics have charged the CIA did not provide good intelligence during Operation Desert

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Storm, and failed to back a coup attempt against Panamanian dictator Gen. Manuel Noriega in 1989 because of fears of violating U.S. laws.

Mr. Bush dismissed the criticism, claiming support from spy agencies during the Gulf crisis "was superb and the intelligence was outstanding and the community performed fan-

tastically." He pledged to visit CIA headquarters in Langley soon to deliver that message in person.

Sources said long shots for Mr. Webster's job include Deputy CIA Director Richard Kerr; former Deputy CIA Director Bobby Ray Inman, a favorite of Senate Democrats; and Sen. Malcolm Wallop, a conservative Wyoming Republican with intelligence experience.

Retired Army Lt. Gen. William Odom, a former National Security Agency director, is said to be a candidate.

Officials close to the White House and CIA said the president might choose an extreme "dark horse" candidate, possibly a former senator or another federal judge.

A senior Bush administration official said Mr. Gates, who withdrew his nomination to be CIA director in 1987 in the face of Senate anger over the Iran-Contra affair, is "on the top of the short list" of candidates for the CIA job.

Mr. Gates has held his job as deputy to Mr. Scowcroft since the beginning of the Bush administration. Before taking the White House job, he reportedly told associates he probably would never get his wish to run the CIA.

"Don't count him out," said another administration official.

Mr. Bush said Mr. Gates is "a worthy man" and "we all have great respect for him."

Sen. William Cohen, Maine Republican and former vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said he would "recommend someone like Bob Gates" for the job.

Regarding the controversy over Mr. Gates' security-adviser nomination in 1987, in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair, Mr. Cohen said, "I believe that he would be able to be confirmed notwithstanding the questions that were raised at that time."

"We were right in the middle of the Iran-Contra affair, and the emotions were high. And I think that he

was not given fair or full consideration for the job that he had done," Mr. Cohen said.

Sen. Orrin Hatch said Mr. Webster was a "class act" who successfully blocked congressional critics of the CIA from "tearing it apart" after the Iran-Contra affair.

The Utah Republican said Mr. Webster provided excellent support to "freedom fighter" covert action programs in Afghanistan, Angola and other places.

"He was willing to take far more risks as he became familiar with the job," said Mr. Hatch, a former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Mr. Hatch said the CIA chief also took the bold step of telling Congress that sanctions alone were not likely to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

"That took guts," Mr. Hatch said. "He took some flak on that, but he was willing to do it because he knew it was right."

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren, Oklahoma Democrat, said Mr. Webster made "an immense contribution" to helping restore public confidence in both the FBI and CIA.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Dave McCurdy, Oklahoma Democrat, said Mr. Webster's successor should be "a person with experience, judgment and great intellectual curiosity and interest in the world, beyond just the Soviet Union."

WILLIAM H. WEBSTER

Born:

March 6, 1924, in St. Louis.

Family:

Wife, Lynda. Three children by first wife: Drusilla Lane Busch, William Hedgcock Webster and Katherine Hagee Roessle.

Education:

Bachelor's degree, Amherst College, 1947.

Law degree, Washington University, 1949.

Doctor of laws, Amherst, 1975.

Doctor of laws, Washington University, 1978.

Career highlights:

Lt. (j.g.) U.S. Naval Reserve, 1943-46.

Lt. USNR, 1951-52.

Partner law firm, Armstrong, Teasdale, Kramer and Vaughan, 1956-59 and 1961-70.

U.S. attorney, Eastern District, Mo., 1960-61.

Member, Missouri Board of Law Examiners, 1964-69.

Judge, U.S. District Court, Eastern Missouri District, 1971-73.

Judge, 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, 1973-78.

Director, FBI, 1978-87.

Director, CIA, 1987-91.

Source: Who's Who in America, 1990-91

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